



Episode 20: The Meaning of Incense

SUMMARY

The Church herself tells us that incense is an expression of reverence and prayer. She prays along with Psalm 141: “Let my prayer be incense before you; my uplifted hands an evening offering.” The Book of Revelation also gives an understanding of the use of incense, even in heaven: the incense is joined to the prayer of the saints around the throne of God. St. Paul goes even further to suggest that not only does incense represent prayer, it signifies also the Christian: “we are the aroma of Christ.” (2 Corinthians 2:15) Incense is a sacramental sign that can be seen, smelled, and even heard.

The different levels of reverence indicate the way the incense is used at Mass. Three swings of the censor or thurible may be given to the Blessed Sacrament at the consecration and also to anything in the Mass that represents Christ: the priest, the people, the Book of Gospels, the Paschal Candle, the Cross. Two swings are reserved for images and relics of saints. A single swing is used when incensing around the altar. Incense may be used at five different times during Mass: the Entrance Procession, at the

beginning of Mass to incense the cross and altar, at the Gospel, the Offertory, and during the Eucharistic Prayer at the elevation of the consecrated host and chalice.

When we see the incense, let us think of our prayers rising to heaven, up to the throne of God. When we inhale its fragrance, let us remind ourselves that in this world we are to be the sweet odor of Christ. When incense is used at Mass, let us recall our participation in the heavenly liturgy described in the Book of Revelation.

The Roman Pontifical

Incense is burned on the altar to signify that the Sacrifice of Christ, which is there perpetuated in mystery, ascends to God as an odor of sweetness; this is also a sign that the pleasing and acceptable prayers of the faithful rise up to the throne of God.

Moreover, the incensation of the main body of the church indicates that the dedication makes it a house of prayer; but the People of God are incensed first, for they are the living temple in which each faithful member is a spiritual altar.

The Order of the Dedication of a Church, n°. 17

IN THE TRADITION

“Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a gold censer. He was given a great quantity of incense to offer, along with the prayers of all the holy ones, on the gold altar that was before the throne. The smoke of the incense along with the prayers of the holy ones went up before God from the hand of the angel.”

Revelation 8:3-4

“Let my prayer be incense before you; my uplifted hands an evening offering.”

Psalm 141:2

“The fire [of martyrdom] produced the likeness of a vaulted chamber, like a ship’s sail bellying to the breeze, and surrounded the martyr’s body as with a wall; and he was in the center of it, not as burning flesh, but as bread that is baking, or as gold and silver refined in a fire! In fact, we even caught an aroma such as the scent of incense or of some other precious spice.”

The Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp

“The evening sacrifice is the Lord’s passion, the Lord’s cross, the offering of the saving victim in a holocaust acceptable to God. [...] Because of him, every prayer purely directed from the heart of a believer rises like incense, as from a holy altar. Nothing is more delightful than this fragrance of the Lord. May all who believe send forth the same fragrance.”

Saint Augustine
Exposition on Psalm 141 (140)

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

✠ “To accomplish so great a work, Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of

His minister [...] but especially under the Eucharistic species. [...] He is present in His word [...] He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings...”

Sacrosanctum Concilium, n.º 7

✠ “In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims ...”

Sacrosanctum Concilium, n.º 8

IN THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

Let our prayer rise, O Lord,
like incense in your sight;
and as this house is filled
with a pleasing fragrance,
so let your Church be fragrant
with the aroma of Christ.

Dedication of a Church

We beseech you, almighty God,
that those you renew by your Sacraments
may merit to become
the pleasing fragrance of Christ.
Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

Prayer after Communion, Chrism Mass

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Incense used at Mass has a variety of meanings. Which one speaks most significantly to you?
2. How can Christians be the “sweet aroma of Christ” in the world?

FOR FURTHER READING

Louis Bouyer, *Rite and Man: Natural Sacredness and Christian Liturgy*, (University of Notre Dame Press, 1967).